



Refining Instruction-giving and the Use of Language



The teaching of Yoga entails the three main learning-styles: audio, visual and kinaesthetic. Most of us have a tendency towards one or the other, though some people use all three; and as, when we teach, we generally give instructions (audio), demonstrate (visual), and invite students to experience the posture - and other practices – (kinaesthetic) for themselves, there is something for everyone. We, as teachers, will also have our own learning styles and tendencies, so it is useful to regard instruction-giving as an organic, two-way process, which is not necessarily just audio. After all, some students may be hard of hearing and even deaf. Whatever our students relate to as individuals we, as teachers, need to relate to the class as a whole while bearing the individuals in mind. Skilful use of language, the deft insertion of a little light-heartedness and a considerate attitude all help. This is quite a task, but we can develop skill-sets to assure that nobody – particularly the deaf – feel left out. Communication is key to this.

Every student's experience of Yoga is going to be different and in one class we can have a huge range. On one mat there may be an elderly and somewhat unfit and overweight woman who has joined up because her daughter has recommended it will help with her anxiety and sleep patterns – and on the next mat there could be a lithe young thing in full designer gear who is used to going to Ashtanga classes and wants to let everyone know it by jumping from Dog Pose to Uttanasana. But how to give instructions which would include both students? What are the common denominators? How to create harmony when students seem to be attending the class for such diverse reasons?



How do students listen?

It is useful to bear the three learning styles in mind when teaching. Predominantly audio learners, for example, might tend to space out when you, as the teacher, are demonstrating – unless you speak while you do so; predominantly kinaesthetic learners will tend to move into the posture while you are demonstrating – which can be confusing for others, as they will then want to move into the posture also, thinking they might have missed something. If we go along with this, and allow the students to fall into the posture before we have finished demonstrating, we are creating confusion – not just about what we are doing, but about who is in charge. Therefore we have to be clear from the start. When demonstrating, it's a good idea to say something like: 'I am demonstrating. Don't do it with me. Stand in Tadasana.'

Communication

One of the great joys of Yoga is that it brings us into the present moment. When students come into the room we ask them: 'How are you? How are you feeling? How is your back/shoulder/knee today?' Both teacher and student have a tendency on occasion to lapse into anecdotal mode, in which the past tense will be used, and we can summon up gloriously hopeful visions of the future based on the present experience ie. 'You should sleep well tonight', but, on the whole, language is very immediate in Yoga-teaching and instructions are given in the vocative case ie. as instructions.

But how do we give these instructions? Indeed, are we really 'Yoga instructors', as they say in America, or creating a safe environment in which students can experience their own bodies and gain confidence in assessing how far they need to stretch for themselves? Well, hopefully we are doing both. The instructions form the framework in which students can experience some self-reflection. But where does one end and the other begin? And how can self-study and understanding begin if we can't actually comprehend the instructions?



Clear Instructions

With some instructions, clarity is not an issue. The use of `doing' verbs such as `step', `bend', `raise' and `place' are not generally a problem. More complex is when a teacher uses a word like `evolve' or `tilt.' Pelvic tilts are always confusing – both for teacher and student. I have had a teacher talk about `tilting' but I had no idea what she meant. She kept on repeating the word, as if repetition of the same word would help. It didn't. I asked her to show me and it wasn't till she stood up and stretched sideways that I understood. She meant a lateral spinal flexion/extension. But there we have another tricky word. `Extend' is usually used in yoga instructions to mean `stretch out' (eg. `Extend your legs'), whereas `extension of the spine' in kinaesthetic terminology refers to back-bends. We can overcome these difficulties by using different phrases for the same instruction. Had the woman who had been talking about `tilting' said `stretch sideways as in Trikonasana', I would have understood her the first time. Sometimes it is better to simply avoid the ambiguous words and find different ways of saying it.

We also want to use phrasing which avoids ambiguity. I know of male teachers who will not teach anything with the feet or the legs apart because of the embarrassment of inadvertently using suggestive phrases. However, there are innocuous ways to say `Open your legs'. In Upavista Konasana, for example, one could say `Take the feet out to the sides, keeping the knees straight or bent, taking care not to stress the hip-joints.' In Supta Baddha Konasana one could substitute `Press the soles of the feet together' for `Take the knees out', and in Padottanasana one could simply say `Step the feet out to a comfortable distance.' By focussing on the feet, knees and hips – all of which are part of the leg's territory - we avoid potential awkwardness.



Language

Although it's good practice to use Sanskrit names for the postures, we don't want to over-burden students with words they don't understand. So it is useful to the students' learning to add the translation after a Sanskrit term: 'Tadasana – Mountain Pose' – and to maybe back it up with a bit of circumstantial detail: 'What's your mountain like? How was it formed? By the collision of two continents, like the Himalayas, by a volcanic explosion ... or was it simply eroded into existence over millennia?' One could go on (I often do), focus on physical instructions and, crucially, allow the students some silent space to experience their Tadasana. Otherwise our words become a mere babbling brook, and the students zone out of our carefully-tuned phrases and veer into the land of shopping lists or worlds evoked by the movie they watched on Netflix last night. Reminding them of the present moment, which will never come again, is never wasted. And if that moment is one of silent reflection then it will flavour the rest of their moments, and the Yoga experience is enhanced.

When I first attended the classes of BKS Iyengar in Pune, there was an instruction that mystified us all. It involved the 'Ampichest'. Where oh where is the Ampichest? Is it an English word, Maharashtran dialect or Sanskrit? Eventually the answer was revealed to us by someone who know the ropes: 'Armpit-chest'. It's a region I now give much attention to, but refer to as 'the upper side ribs'. In this case there was no danger of my repeating the term 'Ampichest', especially as I did not understand it. It's nice to be clear.

As well as avoiding words and phrases which people don't understand, there are other words and phrases which we avoid. Obvious ones are swear words and words which evoke a negative atmosphere. Some words are just unpleasant, though this can be quite subjective. For some, the words 'drain' and 'suck' strike a sordid rip in the sattvic aspirations of a Yoga class. Yet other words may appear innocent and



yet ... the word `try', for example, may evoke a sense of failure before one begins. The word `stretch' is not one of my favourites, as it can encourage too much enthusiasm in the eager over-reachers. We all have a way of speaking and a certain lexicon of our own, and it is up to each of us to cultivate a harmonious net of words with which to capture our students' attention.

Creative Use of Language

Clarity does not necessarily exclude creativity, and a creative approach to language will engage those of a more visual-learning style. As many of the postures are inspired by animals and aspects of nature, it is not hard to find associated vocabulary. In the Dog pose we can refer to different types of dogs – from Chihuahuas to St. Bernards – to exemplify the wide range of dog poses in the room. In Matsyasana we can evoke the qualities of a fish - `Fish don't get wet, but they move by grace of the water' – in order to evoke a more sensitive and less definitive guide to doing the posture. However, we also have to beware of over-burdening the students with words and our own vision, and we have to be careful of the direction the class may take if we get too wrapped up in similes. The outrageous practices of the kennel club (consequent of a Yoga Speak on the Dog pose) can be a bit of a downer, so perhaps it is better to suggest than to define. If words fail us, great. Students do need space to experience and yes, even visualise, for themselves. And so we refine both our teaching and the students' experience.

Inclusivity

It's always good to know our students' names. Personally, I check that I know each student's name when they arrive and I do the verbal screening. `I'm Wendy, what's your name?' I say if they are new. `Remind me', I say, if I know the face but have forgotten the name. I write the student's names down on a piece of paper, adding any dodgy shoulders or hip replacements I should be remembering, so I can refer to the paper whenever the students are taking a face-down breather between



postures. Knowing the students' names rustles up a friendly atmosphere, reminds the students that you are thinking about them as individuals – and is a practical teaching tool.

Perhaps in Virabhadrasana I everyone's knee is perfectly aligned but for Hermione's, which is over her toes. You could go for the general approach, but then half the class straighten their front legs; or you could say: 'Hermione, can you draw your knee back a little so your knee is over your ankle, not your toes.' If that doesn't work you can try tricking her: 'Lift your toes and bring the back hip forwards.' And when she has achieved this you can scatter the glitter of praise over any feelings of victimisation. 'Well done!', 'Great!', 'Fantastic!' etc. – and move seamlessly on to the next perfect moment. Because you are a Yoga Rock Star.

On a practical level, it's inclusive and discreetly sociable to address every student by name just once. I have been a student in classes where only one name has been used (that one being 'Wendy'), and it's no fun. On the other hand, it's not much fun being ignored either. What am I paying for? I might as well stick with YouTube. Some students are more demanding and others do require more attention ... we need to save our breath and relax. Students are not going to 'get' it all in one day, and as long as what they're doing isn't actively dangerous we can take a long view. It's more important to simply have them safely there, engaging their bodies, breath and mind with the present - than to have them doing it 'correctly.'

In the above example I have used considerate language to encourage Hermione to bring her knee back. But suppose she takes me literally, and only brings her knee back half a centimetre, so she is still over-reaching? Or, worse still - supposing she actually takes her knee forwards even further? Despite our best intentions, students don't always respond as we would like. What do we do then? If a quick trick doesn't work it might be time to come out of the posture. We don't



want to exhaust everyone while we concentrate on Hermione. We could either repeat the posture with some general input about over-reaching, or refer to over-reaching in a subsequent posture. It's probably a good idea to resist moralising about how 'over-reaching' in a posture might indicate 'over-reaching' in real life. It's generally more conducive to cordial relations to avoid moralising.

Listening with Our Eyes

Communication is not only about use of language and inclusivity but also about what we see. We need to refine our awareness so we know if all our students can see us when demonstrating - and also that we can see them. There are students who like to lurk at the back, hoping they won't be 'picked on'. Sometimes only the crown chakra is visible - but if they have already been encouraged to make themselves visible, it's perhaps a good idea for the teacher to move ... and to keep moving. When we demonstrate, we are not actually 'doing' a posture for ourselves. It's not about us. We are not Yoga Rock Stars but trained monkeys, capable of talking while demonstrating and thereby snaring the attention of the audio-learners.

Sometimes - with Utkatasana, for example - it's practical for students and teacher to do a posture together. Some teachers are adept at mirroring ie. moving their right side when they say left - and for others it just doesn't work. It's important to be honest - with ourselves and our students - and to state which we are doing. Otherwise we invite being misinterpreted (as in a student chirping up: 'You do realise you're moving your left foot and not your right?'). And of course many people don't actually know their right from their left, so it's a good idea to follow up or even substitute talk of right or left with defining phrases such as 'towards the door', 'away from the mirror' and 'in the direction of the window.'

If we cannot see the students as they do the posture - Adho Mukha Svanasana, for example - it's a good idea to desist. A teacher who is doing a Dog



or a Cat with the students is not really doing their job properly. Some postures benefit from a sideways survey, and the use of the voice is therefore more relevant.

The teacher also has the advantage of foresight. If the mats are in rows it's good preparation for Padottanasana, for example to ensure that the students' mats are staggered, so they do not end up with their noses in the rear of the person in front of them. We do not need to explain but we do want to avoid this inelegant situation. I have found that if I say: 'You need to stagger your mats' the students generally haven't got a clue what I'm talking about – possibly because they don't know what's coming, and they have no context. For all they know, I'm planning to ply their yoga mats with whisky so they can't walk straight, and that makes no sense. Instead I will give a quick demonstration of the posture to come, and ask every other student to take their mat forwards. Once the situation has been clarified, the students generally understand. The same goes for Virabhadrasana III – if the mats are not appropriately arranged, they can easily end up diving into the personal space of the person opposite them, but it usually takes an enactment of the possible situation which we want to avoid for them to understand ... We are dealing with the present tense in a Yoga class, and the first conditional is often a step too far.

Authenticity

Sometimes teachers repeat the instructions they have heard from their teachers without putting the words through the process of their own experience. Unfortunately, students can pick up on the fact that the teacher is not using authentic vocabulary – whether because they instinctively detect a departure from the teacher's usual speech-patterns, or because they simply don't understand the instruction as it doesn't chime with the rest of the instructions. It is therefore quite important that we, as teachers, process what we learn and make it our own before



passing it on. Otherwise what hope do the students have of an individual experience?

In order to cultivate an authentic voice, the teacher needs to maintain a consistent practice and to take note not only of their own process, but of what aspects they can take into their teaching. This would not necessarily be a matter of physical instruction but also of metaphysical interpretation. When doing Cobra, for example, we don't want to encourage students to do exactly as we do – we want to help them to do their own Cobra, and this we do, each of us in our own way. We might stress the sacred elegance and beauty of the snake, the cohesion of the spine, or its curiosity. Every sleeping Kundalini is awakened, and transformation begins to occur. The students are responsible for their own posture, their own self-reflection. Words create magic.

Yoga Speak

All good yoga teachers have a tendency to veer off into 'Yoga Speak' upon occasion. We don't want Yoga Speak in the middle of Virabhadrasana III or during Sun Salutations but afterwards, during the recovery phase, there may be a case for it. This is when there is a bit of a lull and perhaps some recent activity has triggered an opportunity to ad lib a bit. What words can we use which will mean something to both the overweight student and the seriously flexible show-off?

Actually, the needs of these two random students are not so different. Yoga, as we know, is a great leveller. It is non-competitive. The underlying principle of Yoga is one of 'Samatva', or balance. The lithe young thing may have jumped from Dog to Uttanasana with a thump that sets the cutlery in the kitchen rattling in its drawers. The overweight woman may have moved with great caution and delicacy. Without upsetting anyone, it's possible to make statements such as:



‘Yoga is a combination of flexibility and stability. Maybe you are under the illusion that Yoga is about stretching as far as you can. I used to think that, for sure. But actually the great challenge is to engage with ‘Nirodha’, or limitation. Stiff people already have this, and it’s a gift. Flexible people need to develop it. We all do what we can, according to our given lights ... And at the end of the day, it really has nothing to do with how good the posture might look on your Instagram account. It’s about what it feels like. ‘How do you feel now? Ready to move on?’

Tone of Voice and How We Speak

Attending a yoga class in India with an Indian Guru can sometimes seem like boot-camp. ‘Be in Tadasana. Shoulders straight. Open up the Ampichest!’ – and all the while in a harsh, unloving voice. The air thickens with the mist arising from the fearful kidneys of the students. When we become tense we become more resistant to instruction. It’s a fear-cycle which leads to liberation. That’s the way it’s always been. But here in the west, when we need to consider the needs of our sensitive students who have come to class under a doctor’s instructions, it might be kinder to engage a more suggestive approach, such as: ‘Stand still as a mountain.’

Whatever we say, we need to consider how it will be heard, and make it our own. We can refine the instruction: ‘Stand in Tadasana’ and even depersonalise it to: ‘Tadasana.’ We can turn a negative order into a suggestion: ‘How about returning to our sacred mountain’ or an invitation: ‘Why don’t you just stand in Tadasana?’

There are certain set phrases which do the rounds of Yoga classes: ‘Tuck the tail-bone under’ for Tadasana; ‘Imagine you are between two panes of glass’ in Trikonasana; ‘Relax the buttocks’ in Bhujangasana. Personally I disagree with them all, but it is common for teachers to repeat them as if they were the Gospel of Yoga. Maybe this simply stems from insecurity, but one path to developing the alter ego of a true Yoga Rock Star is to dismantle every set phrase, examine every part of our



vocabulary, and reassemble according to our own vision. And one way of successfully engaging everyone's attention and simultaneously creating a positive group 'vibe' that people will want to return to is through taking a humorous approach to this very serious subject. Many people come to yoga because they are stressed, and when we are stressed we lose our sense of humour. Though we put a lot of work into our yoga-teaching, a light delivery will make it more attractive. We just have to beware of becoming stand-up comics.

One could say that consideration of use of language is wasted on the deaf, but creative language can be mirrored in body language and backed up by non-verbal channels of communication. If we make an effort to include the hard-of-hearing into the class, they will come back. If we ignore them, they may well not. And silence is itself a powerful tool. Sometimes it is in the silence that our voices are most effectively communicated. It is by listening to and observing the students that we as teachers refine our communication skills. It is an on-going process and the rewards are great.

<https://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-3736/Effective-Language-for-Yoga-Teaching.html> (Accessed 18.9.'18)

<https://www.yogajournal.com/teach/the-art-of-verbal-communication>
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